A number of well-meaning academics are claiming that the age of miracles is not over. Leading the charge is an American Professor of Biblical Studies, Dr Craig Keener. In 2011 he published his two volume book "Miracles", where his central argument that miracles occurred in the 1st Century is that they are still frequently occurring in the 21st Century. He demonstrates his case by describing literally hundreds of contemporary healing stories from around the world, which he takes entirely at face value.

Having investigated modern miracles stories for more than 50 years, without finding a single compelling case, I was interested to see that he was familiar with my published work and repeatedly referred to it (May P. "*Claimed Contemporary Miracles."* Medico-Legal Journal 71 (4, 2003): 144-58*)*. So I wrote to him in 2018 to see if we could write a joint article. My idea was that he would choose a few of his 'best cases' and explain why he thought they were miracles. I would then respond from a medical viewpoint. Readers could then draw their own conclusions.

He replied that he was too busy to do this. Much of his time was evidently being spent writing a more 'popular' book on the subject, "Miracles Today", which was then published in 2021. Remarkably, theologians, and other non-medical people are taking his claims seriously, but I see major flaws in his work.

Firstly, Keener has not personally investigated any of his stories and fails to ask the most basic questions. He does not seem to appreciate the value of rigorous scepticism as an essential ingredient in the search for truth. He sees the sceptic as someone who wants to undermine objective truth for hidden purposes. The true sceptic, however, is someone who is rigorously searching for honest evidence on which to ground his beliefs. It is the cynic, not the sceptic, who has devious motives and a prejudiced viewpoint. Keener doesn't even offer a question mark in the title of his new book.

Secondly, he does not define his terms. He does not distinguish between a healing through natural processes and a miraculous over-ruling of the laws of nature. He uses a wide range of phrases interchangeably. He writes about "a healing", "an extraordinarily fast recovery," "a cure", "extra-normal" event, "a divine enablement", "a miracle" and "some sort of divine miracle". For example, he writes:

IF A PERSON, WHO HAS NOT WALKED FOR TEN YEARS, CAN SUDDENLY WALK AFTER PRAYER, I WOULD NORMALLY SEE THAT AS A DIVINE ENABLEMENT. BARRING AN ADDITIONAL MIRACLE, THE PERSON WILL NEED SOME SUPPORT BECAUSE HER MUSCLES WILL STILL BE ATROPHIED FOR A TIME

Miracles Today p.5

Thirdly, he offers no evidence for the diagnosis of a given illness, but takes the patient's story at face value. No doctor would do that. He would first interrogate the story, then examine the patient, before scientifically

investigating the illness. We need to know what was actually wrong with our patients, if we are ever to say they are now cured.

Fourthly, he assumes that the miracles of Christ are no different from the healings we are commonly seeing today. He argues we can conclude that Christ performed miracles because such things are so often witnessed today! But this is not a great argument for the deity of Christ.

Fifthly, he offers no documented evidence to show that a miracle has occurred. He just accepts the stories that people have told him. I find this extraordinarily naive.

Christ-like Miracles

There are difficulties in trying to define a miracle. In 1735, the Enlightenment scholar, Cardinal Prospero Lambertini, who later became Pope Benedict 14th, published important ground rules for identifying miracles, in order to distinguish them from natural phenomena. He did this by focusing on the characteristics of Christ's miracles, as recorded in the Gospels. He concluded that these showed five central characteristics:

1. **The diseases were serious, incurable and unlikely to respond to treatment.** Many of the diseases Christ is said to have cured remain incurable to this day, such as a fixed curvature of the spine, a man born blind, paralysis from birth and resurrection from death after four days.
2. **The disease which disappeared was not one that could have resolved spontaneously.**
3. **No potentially curative treatment was given.**
4. **With only minor exceptions, Christ's miracles were sudden and reached instantaneously**.
5. **These cures were complete, not partial.** Consider the withered hand, for instance: it was fully restored as it was stretched forward, reconnecting nerves, restoring muscle bulk and liberating unused joints (see Matthew 12:13).

We should note a further characteristic: **Christ's miracles happened at a word of command.**

Are ***any*** of Keener's healings immediate, complete cures of incurable diseases at a word of command, which could not remit on their own and where no effective treatment was given? Having read his books carefully, I cannot identify a single one. Some bear no resemblance:

DALLAS'S RECOVERY WAS ONLY BEGINNING…HE COULD USE HIS RIGHT HAND, THE LEFT SIDE OF HIS BODY REMAINED PARALYSED …DALLAS WAS IN HOSPITAL FOR THIRTY-ONE DAYS…AFTER 3 MONTHS HE COULD STAND…IN SIX MONTHS HE WAS WALKING, AND WITHIN A YEAR HE HAD FULLY RECOVERED

Miracles Today, p. 64-67

Previous investigations

Not surprisingly, I am not the first medical doctor to ask for compelling evidence, when claims of miraculous healing are being made. This is because of the life-threatening dangers to seriously ill people, who might consider it as an 'act of faith' to seek a miracle and thereby delay seeing their doctor, refuse surgery or discontinue essential medication.

In 1910, the British Medical Journal published a series of papers on the subject. In 1956, the British Medical Association published a report in response to questions raised by the Archbishops' Commission on Divine Healing. Their report concluded:

> WE FIND THAT, WHILST PATIENTS SUFFERING FROM PSYCHOGENIC DISORDERS MAY BE "CURED" BY VARIOUS METHODS OF SPIRITUAL HEALING… WE CAN FIND NO EVIDENCE THAT ORGANIC DISEASES ARE CURED SOLELY BY SUCH MEANS.

The Archbishop's Commission reported in 1958 that "no actual authenticated case of extraordinary and medically inexplicable healing had been brought to the committee's notice" (Richards J. (ed) *The Church's Healing Ministry – Report of 1958 Archbishops' Commission. 1987).*

Also in 1956, the UK's Christian Medical Fellowship (CMF) published the comprehensive and detailed findings of their own study group, chaired by Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones. Revised and expanded editions of this valuable resource were then published in 1966 and 1979. In 1987, in his book *The Faith Healers,* James Randi exposed the fraudulent antics he discovered at healing Crusades. In 1989, a debate book on the subject, *When Christians Disagree: Signs, Wonders & Healing,* was published by Inter-Varsity Press. A former CEO of CMF published his own conclusions in 2005. Other CMF members, including pathologist David Powell (in *A Pathologist Looks at Healing – Natural, Miraculous, Spiritual*) have also published their findings. These publications reflect the continuing importance of these matters.

When Morris Cerullo came to the Earls Court Arena in London in 1992, Joan Bakewell asked me to join the BBC's "Heart of the Matter" team to investigate his claims. No miracles were found, but vulnerable people suffered and one woman died after stopping her epilepsy medication. She had a fit in the bath and drowned.

In 1991, the Climatologist Sir John Houghton set up a Consultation on Christian Healing, publishing its findings in 1997:

> WIDE ENQUIRIES HAVE BEEN MADE OVER A CONSIDERABLE PERIOD OF TIME WITHOUT FINDING CONVINCING EVIDENCE THAT HEALING MIRACLES OF THE KIND DONE BY JESUS ARE OCCURRING TODAY IN THE UK. BY THE KIND DONE BY JESUS IS MEANT THE

> INSTANTANEOUS, COMPLETE HEALING OF INCURABLE PHYSICAL DISEASES, AT A WORD OF COMMAND, WITHOUT OTHER THERAPY AND IN CONDITIONS WITH NO KNOWN INCIDENCE OF SPONTANEOUS REMISSION. THIS IS NOT TO SAY THAT ALL JESUS' HEALINGS FELL WITHIN THIS TIGHT DEFINITION, BUT MOST DID AND ANY MINISTRY THAT CLAIMS TO BE A CONTINUATION OF JESUS' SHOULD, ARGUABLY, INCLUDE SUCH MIRACLES.
>
> Lucas E. ed *"Christian Healing: What Can We Believe?"* Lynx, SPCK 1997. P104

Members also agreed this consensus statement:

> HEALINGS HAVING ALL THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THOSE IN THE MINISTRY OF JESUS ARE RARE TODAY…SOME WOULD ARGUE THAT THERE IS NO ADEQUATELY DOCUMENTED CASE.
>
> Lucas E. ed *"Christian Healing: What Can We Believe?"* Lynx, SPCK 1997. P197

I continue to make the point that you cannot logically say such healings are 'rare', if you cannot identify a single case.

Lourdes

Keener writes, "Dramatic cures do occur at Lourdes. Whatever one makes of some of the roughly seven thousand claims, some seem impressive" (p.57). "Standards at Lourdes are so strict that they undoubtedly screen out many genuine cures" (p.58). "If someone demands medical evidence for miracles, such evidence is available" (p.59).

Craig Keener may have declined my challenge to select his 'three best cases' for public discussion, but having identified Lourdes as the source of some of the best attested medical evidence, he goes on to select four cases for us to consider.

In September 1995, I discussed these claims with Dr. Theodore Mangiapan, the former Clinical Director at Lourdes (1972-1990) and I summarised my conclusions in the journal "Science and Christian Belief". Of those thousands of claims made over a period of 150 years, only 67 of them impressed the Catholic Church authorities to conclude that a miracle had actually taken place. But only seven of them have been accepted as miracles since 1960, so the number of miracle cures from Lourdes seems to be in steep decline. Here is Keener's selection (p.57-59 and 86):

1. In 1924, Elizabeth Delot had a stomach cancer and gradually recovered following surgery. The Church did not accept this as a miracle.
2. Lourdes miracle no. 63: In 1962, Vittorio Micheli gradually recovered from a cancer of his hip. It took 2 years, but he then needed reconstruction surgery to raise the head of his femur.
3. Lourdes miracle no. 64: In 1970, Serge Perrin was thought to have had a stroke but crucial tests were normal and he showed evidence of having a psychosomatic illness.
4. Lourdes miracle no. 65 was Dr. Mangiapan's choice of 'best case': In 1976, 12 yr. old Delizia Cirolli was diagnosed as having a cancer in her knee. Over the next year, she gradually recovered. The type of cancer was disputed, so I urged a TV film producer to obtain a second opinion. A histological review at the Royal Marsden Hospital in London in 1998 concluded that there was probably no cancer at all, but a bone infection, probably tuberculosis, which resolved without treatment over the following year.

Dr Theodore Mangiapan, former Clinical Director at Lourdes, autographing his book for the author, (23rd September 1995)

Keener's failure to find a compelling example of a miracle from Lourdes must be seen in the context of the huge numbers of pilgrims who visit that shrine, estimated currently at 6 million per year, with a total of 200 million since 1860 – and not a verifiable miracle to be found.

The Vatican

Dr. Jacalyn Duffin, a Canadian haematologist visited Rome to research the Secret Vatican Archives to find out about the miracles attributed to the Catholic Saints in modern times. How many were physical illnesses? What diseases were cured? What did skeptical doctors make of these events? She discovered that the medical details of each case were kept secret throughout the next six papacies. This meant she was only able to see documents before 1939.

However, the Canonisation of Cardinal Henry Newman in 2008 provided me with a unique opportunity to see behind these veils of Vatican secrecy. Pope Benedict XVI was due to visit Birmingham for the occasion, so I phoned the Birmingham Oratory to ask if I could see the relevant medical documents, the "Positio Super Miro". To my amazement, they kindly offered to sell me a copy! So I am now the proud owner of a splendid 250 page large hardback edition.

I can tell you that 62 yr. old Jack Sullivan had lumbar degenerative disc disease, pressing on his 4th lumbar nerve root. In August 2001, he underwent a routine decompressive laminectomy, followed by an "unremarkable postoperative course." He was discharged home a week later. There was nothing miraculous about it. Is that the reason for the secrecy?

Raising the Dead

Craig Keener devotes 37 pages of his book to accounts of raising the dead, including a bizarre story first published by Mahesh Chavda in 1990, where Keener says a death certificate had been issued. The details are embarrassing and included an "Official Notification of Death" of a six year old boy, from an African Clinic near Kinshasa in the Democratic Republic of Congo in 1985. The 'dead' child was reported to have a high fever (a temperature of 104 degrees Fahrenheit) as well as a measurable blood pressure in the absence of a beating heart! The evidence of death was the fact that the boy did not wake up when a naked flame was held so close to his feet that the scars were still visible years later (Chavda M. *Only Love Can Make A Miracle,* Kingsway, Eastbourne 1991, pp 70,71, 144-148).

The author's copy of Positio Super Miro for the Beatification of Cardinal Henry Newman

A more credible account is the widely publicised 'miracle story' on the website of Dr Sean George, a physician who developed chest pain when driving in Australia. He stopped at a clinic, where he then had a cardiac arrest. The medical team kept him alive with Cardio-Pulmonary Resuscitation for an hour. When his wife arrived and prayed for him, his heart started to beat. He was then flown to a Cardiac Centre as he needed heart surgery. Keener says:

> DEAD FOR MORE THAN ON HOUR UNDER CLINICAL CONDITIONS. SUDDEN RESTARTING OF THE HEART AFTER PRAYER. NO BRAIN DAMAGE. ISN'T THERE SOMETHING NOTEWORTHY ABOUT CASES LIKE DR GEORGE'S?
>
> *Miracles Today p.164*

Yes, there is. CPR works, especially when it is carried out by an experienced team, using an endotracheal tube, a self-inflating Ambu bag with a mask, an oxygen supply, and a defibrillator.

Conclusion

To show that Christ-like miracles continue to happen today, we first need a clear agreement as to what such a miracle would look like, if we ever saw one. Can we agree with Lambertini's criteria, derived from the descriptions of Christ's miracles in the New Testament? And if not, why not?

We then need compelling diagnostic evidence both of an individual's organic disease and that this proven and untreatable illness was completely and instantaneously cured, without any treatment being given, and at a word

of command.

Can we find any such case among the hundreds put forward by Craig Keener? We actually only need **one compelling example** to be able to affirm that healing miracles happen today. Over the past 100 years, many people have searched in vain. My own searches over a 50 year period, have failed to identify a single case. I have found exaggerations, colourful language, wishful thinking, speculative diagnoses, fraudulent claims, delusional illnesses and simple but inevitable failures of lay people to understand medical and physiological processes.

Perhaps, Christ-like miracles do occur today – or maybe even tomorrow – but the onus must be on those who make the claims to provide the evidence. If Christians lose their grip on being truthful in these matters, they will not only lead sick people to abandon good treatment but will fail their Lord badly, because Jesus calls us all to follow the Truth (John 14:6).